

The University of Chicago

THE HISTORY OF THE
INTERPRETATION AND CRITICISM
OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
IN AMERICA, 1620-1900

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDI-
DACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1934

By

DONALD STANLEY KLAISS

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American civilization did not evolve directly from the conditions of primitive man through the progressive stages of growth to fruition, but sprang full-blown, as it were, from the already developed culture of seventeenth-century Europe. It was not until well into the eighteenth century that distinctive American features arose, and these were largely confined to realms of social and political ideas. Nothing distinctively American in the field of religion developed until the nineteenth century, and even then the feeling of dependence on Europe was practically unbreakable.

Foremost among the religious groups in colonial America were the Puritans, who, because of their leadership and their early foundations in the colonies, became the dominant force in the thinking of the whole country. Of second rank in importance, at least as far as numbers is concerned, were the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, who came by thousands during the first half of the eighteenth century. Besides these two major groups there were numerous other sects and racial units which made up the rest of the country, but which lacked any compelling influence in the trends of thought of the period.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries American thought was affected chiefly by Puritanism on the one side and the Doctrine of Natural Rights and Deism on the other.

The foundations of the country were in English Puritanism. The large majority of those emigrating to America in the early seventeenth century who helped to formulate the thinking of the country were voluntary religious exiles. English Puritanism had had a varied growth, influenced by many causes--religious, social, and political. The predominant force back of it was Calvinism. In the doctrines of the Genevan the Puritans found authority for that simplicity in forms of worship which they desired and the scriptural basis for the organization of the state as they thought it should be. Although they were in power for only a short time in England, in America they were more fortunate in being able to control affairs of church and state for a much longer period and to leave their indelible impress on American institutions.

Probably the greatest political force in eighteenth-century America was the theory of natural rights, which had such widespread

popularity and which dominated the thinking of the leaders of the Revolution. The theory had its origin in England and most American thinkers got it directly from the writings of John Locke. Its religious concomitant was rationalism, which under the name of Deism attained temporary prestige in England and was not without its champions in America. In contrast with Calvinism it definitely questioned the validity of the authority of the Bible over the affairs of men.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in America the interpretation of the New Testament was limited to its use as a source-book for arguments on dogmatic, political and ethical propositions. Within this period we find no American devoting himself to the study of the New Testament for the sake of what such study might reveal of the book itself, but only for the sake of supporting a point of view in which he was interested.

As noted above, Puritanism found its theological source in Calvinism. Consequently the use it made of the New Testament was set by the use which Calvin and his successors had made of it. His interpretation was characterized by two emphases: (1) the Bible is divinely inspired in every word and phrase, and is the absolute and final authority for everything; (2) verses may be selected from any part of Scripture regardless of their contexts to prove dogmas and beliefs. It was definitely with this pattern before them that American Puritan leaders used the New Testament in their writings. John Cotton and Roger Williams argued on opposite sides of the question of the relation between church and state, but both used the New Testament as authority for their assertions. Increase Mather and his son Cotton Mather saw in the Bible the law of life for New England. Jonathan Edwards and his disciple Samuel Hopkins built their theological systems upon biblical foundations.

Deism was represented in America by Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson. The former, in his Age of Reason, disputed the supernatural origin of the Bible and questioned the historical accuracy of much of its contents. Jefferson, who published a little book, the Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, in 1803, looked upon Jesus as a teacher entirely human, but whose ethical ideals were valuable for all time.

The vast majority of the American people followed the interpretation of the Calvinists throughout these years.

The nineteenth century was a turning point in the history of New Testament interpretation in America because of the rise of a more specialized New Testament scholarship in the theological seminaries. With the coming of the new century America turned her face from the east to the west, from the past to the future, from

the old to the new. After her break with the mother country and her first efforts of self-support and self-realization, she was beginning to find her strength and to reach out in the vigor of new life. The realism of the eighteenth century was changing to the idealism and romanticism of the nineteenth. The new economic opportunities in America caused by the increase in cotton production in the South, the industrialization of the North, and the possession of new land in the West, produced a kindred feeling of spiritual opportunity that found expression in new hopes and romantic dreams. The period was one of expansion and exploitation on every hand.

Religiously this enterprising spirit issued in the national organization and expansion of the churches. As a complement to the forming of the United States Constitution and the unification of national interests, many of the denominational bodies in America effected national organization and adopted national constitutions.

The years from 1785 to 1820 were a period of great westward movement of population, but, aside from the fact that it created a demand for greater religious and educational facilities, this expansion had no direct influence on theological or biblical study. However, this demand and the general spirit of progress throughout the country promoted the establishment of new educational institutions in the East.

Andover Theological Seminary, founded by the Congregationalists in 1808, was the direct result of a recognition of the need for better means of theological education and of the Unitarian controversy, which, as we shall see, was itself a product of the new romantic spirit of the country. Similar institutions were established in rapid succession by other denominational bodies, so that by 1850 the majority of the theological seminaries that were destined to play an important part in the development of religious thought in America were in existence.

Ever since the colonization of New England, Calvinism had dominated its thought. In the southern colonies French Romanticism had found a hearing, having been promoted especially by Thomas Jefferson in Virginia. The same philosophy traveled westward with the pioneers and found expression there in politics and the spirit of social equality that was typified by the Democracy of Andrew Jackson. Although some of the younger men of New England had been tempted by deistic infidelity, the authority of Calvinism had not been really challenged. But in the early nineteenth century the humanitarian philosophy of Jefferson and Jackson found its way into the very heart of Boston itself in the form of Unitarianism. It derived its cardinal ideas of the inherent value of man and the loving-kindness of God from French, German, and English thinkers.

Thus the philosophy which elsewhere chiefly affected political and social thinking, here found its foremost expression in religion.

The spirit of freedom and open-mindedness which Unitarianism fostered led to a new attitude toward the Bible as well as toward theological doctrine and social action, and we see its effect in the work of the succeeding generations of scholars.

William Ellery Channing, the recognized leader of early Unitarianism, was not as profound a thinker as some of his contemporaries, and his speculations did not lead him far astray from the common beliefs of his day.

But in Andrews Norton, the recognized defender and outstanding scholar of Channing's Unitarianism, we find one whom the progressive spirit affected deeply. As a young man he had lived in Cambridge and his thinking was definitely influenced by the successive events of the early Unitarian controversy. In 1812, when only twenty-six years of age, he began the publication of the General Repository, which avowedly was dedicated to opposing the "prevailing doctrines of orthodoxy," and whose initial article by the editor was entitled "A Defence of Liberal Christianity." Norton became Professor of Biblical Literature at Harvard in 1819, and his chief publications were Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels and Translation of the Gospels with Notes.

In the same liberal stream of thought with Norton was the Unitarian, George Rapall Noyes, who was Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages and Dexter Lecturer on Biblical Literature in Harvard University from 1840 to 1868. He attracted much attention to himself as a radical thinker when in 1834 he wrote an article reviewing E. W. Hengstenberg's Messianic Prophecies in which he expressed doubt as to whether any of the prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament were fulfilled in Jesus. The Attorney General of Massachusetts threatened to prosecute him under the old charge of blasphemy for such a statement. Noyes's principal publication was his New Testament: Translated from the Greek Text of Tischendorf.

Theodore Parker deserves mention here as a representative of this same school, for, although he was not primarily a New Testament scholar, he contributed to the building up of a liberal attitude toward the interpretation of the Bible.

Other scholars who lived and worked later in the century than these pioneers but who owed their inspiration to the same influences were Ezra Abbot, G. L. Cary, and Joseph Henry Thayer. Abbot was recognized as the outstanding American textual authority of his generation. He wrote many linguistic articles for journals and assisted numerous friends with their work. His largest work published was Authorship of the Fourth Gospel: External Evidences,

and he assisted C. R. Gregory on the Prolegomena to the eighth edition of Tischendorf's Greek Testament. G. L. Cary was associated with Meadville Theological School from 1862 to 1902. He published The Synoptic Gospels, together with a Chapter on the Text-Criticism of the New Testament. J. H. Thayer worked on lexical and grammatical studies and became famous for his Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.

Contemporary with Andrews Norton but opposed to the Unitarian movement was Moses Stuart, Professor of Sacred Literature at Andover from 1810 to 1848. Although lined up on the side of the orthodox, Professor Stuart was probably influenced in his views by the more radical expressions of his neighbors. Certain it is that he willingly, and to his own personal detriment, boldly advocated the study of German literature, and without doubt his own thinking was shaped by what he learned therefrom. He was the first American to recognize the value of German New Testament scholarship and he diligently made use of the works that he could acquire. From this beginning came one of the most powerful influences on New Testament scholarship in America. From this time on American interpreters depended on the results of German research. German works were read, Americans in ever increasing numbers went to Germany for study, and many German productions were translated into English and published in America. The more radical German works were not fully accepted in this country, nor was there an inclination to take over the results of conservative scholarship. Rather the so-called "mediating" school of German critics was taken as the standard.

Edward Robinson, who was influenced by Moses Stuart, was one of the first to go to Germany. He did his greatest work in the study of the geography of Palestine.

It was during the lifetime of these men and their young contemporaries that the slavery problem became acute and that the Civil War was waged. For the most part the conflict had no very great bearing on their work except that it tended to slow up study and publication.

The post-war years were a second period of expansion. Throughout the North and West there was a feeling of growth and satisfaction and large productiveness. In the field of New Testament study this productiveness consisted chiefly of commentaries for Sunday school use, records of trips through the Holy Land, popular "lives" of Christ, and so forth. The period was characterized by the writings of such men as Philip Schaff, M. B. Riddle, C. E. Stowe, J. A. Broadus, Alvah Hovey, Timothy Dwight, G. P. Fisher, J. H. Hurst, and J. W. McGarvey. The work of these men is not to be belittled. They were all scholarly and

did much to acquaint readers with the findings of New Testament scholarship, but in their interpretations they were limited by the desire to defend church dogmas. This was true because of their relationship to denominational theological schools. Their criticism was also directly affected by the way in which they looked upon the Bible. All of them viewed it as a product of supernatural inspiration. With such a preconceived notion it was impossible for them to approach their task of interpretation and criticism with objectivity.

Of this group Philip Schaff and M. B. Riddle deserve special mention because of the position of leadership which they held in American New Testament study during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although Dr. Schaff was primarily a church historian his interests were so broad as to include the whole range of biblical and theological study. He promoted the production of several New Testament commentaries, was actively engaged in all religious enterprises in the country for many years, and was the leader in the Bible revision movement in America. Professor Riddle co-operated with Dr. Schaff in much of his work, he produced many works of his own, and assisted in carrying the American Revised Version of the New Testament to its completion.

The majority of New Testament scholars and of the people of the country were advocates of conservative attitudes toward Scripture, but during the latter half of the century there was an increasing tendency on the part of a few to reach out for new ideas and new solutions for old problems. Several factors contributed to this. Owing to the impact of German criticism and the doubts raised by the findings of geology (in its relation to the biblical story of creation) the dogma of the supernatural origin and absolute perfection of the Bible began to lose some of its power. Darwin's theory of the evolutionary process and the growing dependence upon the use of scientific investigation throughout the world added to the undermining of biblical authority. When the necessity for defending an infallible Bible was done away a more critical attitude toward some of its problems was the natural result.

This critical attitude did not find a place in the work of most nineteenth-century interpreters except with regard to the Greek text of the New Testament. In this area the most advanced views of European critics were taken over by American students. One of the direct results of this attitude was the Anglo-American revision of the New Testament.

However, there were a few scholars in America who during the last fifteen years of the nineteenth century adopted the

methods of scientific criticism. The movement was initiated and carried on chiefly by two of the younger men, C. A. Briggs and W. R. Harper. They labored diligently and jeopardized their positions in society in order to defend the validity of critical investigation of the Bible.

E. P. Gould, Orello Cone, G. L. Cary, Frederic Gardiner, E. Y. Hincks, and Marvin R. Vincent were nineteenth-century critics who applied the new methods of higher criticism to their investigations. They probed the question of the authorship of the several New Testament books, they investigated the relationships of the Synoptic Gospels, they sought the historical elements in the lives of Jesus and Paul, and carried on research in a great many areas of New Testament interpretation.

The work done by American New Testament scholars during these three centuries has not been investigated nor recognized by European critics. This is probably true because very little of it was of an original nature. Also, as we have noted, throughout the whole time scholars felt that their investigations were subordinate to dogmatic positions which they desired to defend. This apologetic motive and the assumption of the infallibility of Scripture run as counter-currents to the spirit of free investigation through practically our entire history. On the other hand, there is much of the work of these scholars that is good and deserves a fuller investigation and greater recognition than it has received.

